

March 31, 2019
Fourth Sunday of Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them he addressed this parable.

"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

BACKGROUND:

The fifteenth chapter of Luke contains three parables about God's ability to reach out and forgive. Luke introduces the three parables by saying that the Pharisees and scribes were complaining about the fact that Jesus associated with sinners and tax collectors. "Tax collectors" were detested because they were notorious for extorting unreasonable sums from their countrymen. The money they took from their fellow Jews went to their own purses and to the Roman government. The thought that the limited resources of the Jewish community were going to a foreign occupying government was repulsive. "Sinners" were those whose way of life prevented them from regular observance of the law. Those who had contact with the dead, blood, or any unclean animal would all be referred to as "sinners." The scribes and Pharisees believed that because Jesus was associating with these people, he was sharing with them, and should be considered one of them. Jesus seemed to see his association with the marginalized and outcasts as building a bridge between them and Yahweh.

The parable that Jesus tells in response to their objection is commonly referred to as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." Jewish tradition discouraged fathers from giving their inheritance before death. But even when it was done, the father still retained the right to live off of the property, and it was the responsibility of the sons to take care of the needs of their parents. The youngest son, by taking his inheritance and leaving, had abandoned his responsibility to his father. And in some ways, he was like the tax collectors who would take the wealth of the Jewish people and give it to non-Jews. He had brought shame upon himself, and Luke's description of his state reflects that shame. When he took responsibility for his predicament and decided to return home, he was at least acknowledging his responsibility to care for his father.

The elder son is also portrayed as lacking traditional respect for his father. He had the responsibility to try to dissuade his younger brother from his plan that would bring disgrace upon himself and their family. The older son reveals his separation from his family responsibility by his refusal to enter the family home and help his father host the celebration with their neighbors. Instead he longs to celebrate with his own friends. His comments belittle his father and his father's compassion toward his brother, whom he refuses to refer to as his brother. He refers to his brother as "your son." (Luke 15:30)

From the very beginning of the parable, the father does not act according to the prevailing wisdom. The request for his inheritance by the younger son is an insult. By granting the request, the Father's respect in the community would have been diminished. When the son returns, the father runs out to greet him, which would be taken as another sign of weakness. He gives the best robe, which normally would be his, and sandals, to his son. He does the same with the ring containing the seal of the family. The younger son now has the authority to carry on business in the name of the family. The fatted calf would normally provide food for a hundred or more people, suggesting that the celebration is for the whole community. The father is making a public statement. Even if the people of the community do not respect how he has handled his personal affairs, they will enjoy the fruits of his decisions. But by joining the celebration, they are giving public acceptance of the situation. The father leaves the party to be with the elder son, which would also be a sign of weakness. Again he reaches out personally, to invite the older son to join with the family in this celebration. The father is consistent; he is true to himself.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The opening verses of this week's gospel describe a situation where Jesus is having a meal with sinners and tax collectors of the day, while the Pharisees and scribes are outside complaining about what is going on inside the house. As you envision this scene, where are you?
2. Jesus' being criticized for having friends that are unacceptable reminds me...
3. The younger son realizes that he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son. Does his older brother have the same awareness?
4. If you are able to place yourself in the parable as the younger son, what would it take for you to return to your home town and face your community, your older brother, and your father?
5. If you are now able to place yourself in the parable as the older brother, what is going through your mind as you approach the house after a full day of working and hear the sounds of music and dancing?
6. Whichever brother was easier for you to imagine yourself being, now imagine that your Father comes to speak with you...
7. Place yourself amidst those going to the celebration, and a group of Pharisees have gathered and are complaining to you that this Father has not demanded the proper respect due a father, and you should not be going to the celebration. You respond by...
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about whatever has arisen within you by this parable, the criticism of Jesus by the Pharisees, or your own awareness of yourself during your Lenten journey?

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Excerpts from the Readings for March 31, 2019, the Fourth Sunday of Lent

The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.” While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord. I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the Lord; the lowly will hear me and be glad. Glorify the Lord with me. I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame. When the poor one called out, the Lord heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Tax collectors and sinners drew near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes complained, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So to them Jesus addressed this parable: “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had spent everything, a famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to a local citizen to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘My father’s workers have more than enough, but I am dying from hunger. I shall go and say to my father, ‘I have sinned against heaven and against you; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.’” So he got went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and, filled with compassion, he ran to his son, and embraced him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Bring the finest robe to put on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Slaughter the fattened calf and let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began. When the older son asked what this might mean. A servant said to him, ‘your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because Your brother has returned.’ He became angry, and refused to enter the house. When his father came out, he said, ‘All these years I served you and not once did I disobey you; yet you never gave me even a goat to feast on with my friends.’ He said to him, ‘My son, you are with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

Excerpts from Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 34:2-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; and Luke 15:1-3, 11-32